

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(November 18, 2018)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **HAPPY THANKSGIVING!**

## **Happy (Lamentations?) Thanksgiving, to You!**

(Jeremiah; Lamentations 3:39; 3:22-23)

### **Introduction: Thanksgiving Day anticipations...**

So, it's T-minus four days and counting until Thanksgiving.

You may be looking forward to a great time with family, even a trip to Grandma's house. Or, you're going to hang with great friends, at home or here for the Second Annual Encuentro Thanksgiving Dinner.

Maybe you're excited about a day off of work, a day to rest, that's got you excited. Maybe it's the turkey, dressing, and pecan pie.

Whatever is in store for you, I hope that your Thanksgiving is a great experience.

And it just makes sense that this morning, you are I are focusing on giving thanks. We want to prime the pump today so that our hearts are prepared for a whole week of gratitude to God.

So, where should we turn in our Bibles on the Sunday before Thanksgiving?

Psalms would be a great place to find something for a message about gratitude to God. Lots of my past Thanksgiving messages have been drawn from the psalms.

But, then, any of Paul's or Peter's or John's New Testament letters would also provide fodder for a thanksgiving sermon.

For that matter, there are dozens of stories scattered throughout the Bible that show us God's people praising Him, thanking Him, and worshiping Him for all that He has done and for who He is. We could look at any of those stories today.

But we're not going to the Psalms, to the letters of the New Testament or to stories of grateful hearts.

This morning, I'm choosing for a pre-Thanksgiving meditation time in a book that rarely sees light at this time of year: Lamentations.

With a name like "Lamentations" it's not surprising that it's not much-opened in late November. And today won't rank up there with my happiest Thanksgiving sermons ever. But, by the time we're through, I hope you'll be convinced that Lamentations is perfect for today.

I'm going to take a minute here at the beginning to set the scene for Lamentations. It is a book written by the prophet Jeremiah, while he was sitting among the ruins of a destroyed Jerusalem.

So, how did things get that way? Here's how.

### **The Dark Setting of Lamentations**

#### **Darkness in Israel, Before Jeremiah**

Lamentations was written during the darkest period the Jews had ever faced. And the Jews had faced many dark periods.

It was dark when Abraham's family, in the generation of his grandson, Jacob, faced starvation because of a seven-year famine. Thankfully, God provided for them through Joseph, who welcomed them into Egypt where there was plenty of grain.

Times were dark after the Jews spent four hundred years in Egyptian captivity. At the end of their slavery, though, God led them out from Egypt and safely across the dry Red Sea at the Exodus.

It was a dark time during the period of the judges when “**every man did what was right in his own eyes**” - not what was right in the Lord’s eyes. Again, thankfully, God provided a new way by giving the nation a king, a young man whose heart beat fast for God named David.

Things went from bright, though, back to dark again during the years when the kings ruled the nation.

The splitting of Israel into north (Israel) and south (Judah) was a tragedy. Then, the north’s defeat by Assyria (722 BC) was a disaster. And then, some of the last kings of Judah - Manasseh, Amon, Jehoiakim - brought a succession of terrible reigns. It was very dark.

By the time we come to the days of Jeremiah, late in the nation’s story, people in the southern kingdom of Judah were behaving as badly as the north ever had.

Those Jews down south had every reason to expect discipline from God as severe as what the north got. And that discipline came.

### **Darkness in the Days of Jeremiah**

*Jeremiah’s theme: JUDGMENT!*

From the beginning of the book, Jeremiah warns of judgment. Unless the Jews were to turn from their rebellion against God, the die was cast.

Jeremiah didn’t write a happy book. The message of judgment-to-come permeates every section. He even told the Jews the form that the judgment would take - destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and exile to Babylon.<sup>1</sup>

But, as persistently as he warned them, just that persistently they ignored him. Listen as he describes his decades-long ministry.

*The people’s theme: REJECTION and REBELLION!*

**[25:3] From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, these twenty-three years the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken to you again and again, BUT YOU HAVE NOT LISTENED.**

The Jews thought they had immunity from God’s discipline because they were His people. They believed that they could behave however they wanted to behave and would never be punished by God.

They would soon come to see, though, that God would judge them, and that precisely because He did love them.

The last chapter of Jeremiah’s prophecy brings us to the close of the story of Judah, the end for the Jews’ stay in the Promised Land, and the destruction of the beautiful capitol city, Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> And Jeremiah got what he would have never asked for - a front row seat to view Jerusalem’s downfall.

*God’s theme: DISCIPLINE (Jeremiah 52)*

The fate of Zedekiah, the puppet-king

In those days, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, was the world’s most powerful ruler. He had the power to do whatever he wanted to do.

Among the things he did was replace the rightful king of the Jews, Jehoiachin, with his own puppet-king, Zedekiah.

Tragically, Zedekiah rebelled against God.

Like so many of the Jewish kings, his life is summed up with, **[2 Kings 24:19] He did evil in the sight of the Lord.**

<sup>1</sup> These warnings are scattered throughout the book. You will find them in chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 35, 36, and 37.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 52 is based on the history recorded in 2 Kings 24:18--25:30 (also similar to 2 Chronicles 36:11-21) The last words of Jeremiah 51 suggest chapter 52 is an editor’s epilogue to the book.

But he didn't only rebel against God. He also rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. That rebellion was the straw that broke the camel's back and spelled the end of the Jewish state.<sup>3</sup>

The Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem<sup>4</sup> and King Nebuchadnezzar killed all those who had followed Zedekiah in the uprising. He killed Zedekiah's sons and then he blinded Zedekiah.<sup>5</sup>

Zedekiah was bound with bronze chains, marched to Babylon, and placed in prison where he remained until he died.

Then came the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem.

### The sack of Jerusalem

***[Jeremiah 52:4] Now it came about in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, camped against it and built a siege wall all around it.***

During this siege, Nebuchadnezzar would have used all the military technology available to him in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, BC.

We should picture siege mounds, massive battering rams that pounded the city's walls, and catapults hurling loads of burning tar at the city.

The siege lasted eighteen long months.<sup>6</sup> During that time, no one entered or left the city. There was no re-supply.

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<sup>3</sup> Zedekiah also proved faithless in dealing with a group of slaves. He had granted them their freedom, and then heartlessly re-enslaved them. (Jeremiah 34:8, 16, 21).

<sup>4</sup> At some point during the siege, King Zedekiah and some of those with him escaped the city at night, with an armed escort. They made it a few miles before they were captured and then taken to stand before Nebuchadnezzar.

<sup>5</sup> This ensured that the last thing he ever saw was the assassination of his sons and the death of any hope that his kingly line would survive.

<sup>6</sup> The siege against Jerusalem began near the beginning of January, 588 BC and lasted until the walls were breached in July, 587 BC.

The people inside the city were near starvation when, finally, the Babylonians breached the walls and swept into Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar pulled down the walls surrounding the city.<sup>7</sup>

His army burned Solomon's Temple and the royal palace. From these structures the flames spread and consumed everything.

Jerusalem's wealth was gone, since Babylon had taken all the gold from the temple, ten years earlier, as tribute. Now, at the end, Jeremiah tells us that they also took all the bronze, which was there in enormous quantities.<sup>8</sup>

Taking the gold meant that Jerusalem's loss was Babylon's gain, wealth-wise. The irony of taking the bronze is that bronze was used to make weapons, so that Jerusalem's fall made Babylon even stronger, militarily.

And, they took people.

The Babylonians took thousands of the most influential Jews back home with them, to prosper Babylon. They were tied together and marched all the way from Jerusalem to Babylon in an Old Testament "trail of tears."

Those the Babylonians left behind were the weakest and the poorest. They were left behind to work fields and vineyards for the Babylonians.

The city was not completely depopulated, but the people left were completely demoralized.

When Jerusalem was sacked, the Babylonians, who actually respected Jeremiah, invited him to go with them back to Babylon.

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<sup>7</sup> In chapter one, Jeremiah was commissioned to "***pull down***" kingdoms.

<sup>8</sup> The two gigantic pillars on the outside of the temple building were broken in pieces, as was the ten-thousand-gallon capacity "bronze sea" used for ceremonial cleansing. They took all the bronze utensils that were used in the temple for worshipping God - bowls, firepans, basins, pots, lampstands, and pans - to Babylon.

By this time, Jeremiah was an old man. Going to Babylon would have meant honorable treatment. He would be allowed to live out his remaining years in comfort and peace in the Babylonian palace.

Jeremiah declined. He decided to stay behind in Jerusalem with the remnant. And, while there, and in the last years of his life, he wrote the book we call Lamentations.

In Lamentations we find words that, while not exactly about giving thanks, are especially fit for four days before Thanksgiving, 2018.

### **About Complaining...**

***[3:39] Why should any living man or any mortal offer complaint in view of his sin?***

#### **When We Do It to Ourselves**

That's a mouthful.

The destruction of Jerusalem took place in 586 BC. So, imagine sitting in the city with friends a couple of years later, say, 584 BC.

You are looking at the wreckage, glancing over to where the temple used to stand. You see the broken-down walls that used to guard the city.

Life is miserable, hard, and dangerous. The only leaders are the Babylonian masters. Work is scarce, prices and taxes are high.

And you are forbidden to complain.

God's Word to you is, *"Don't even let Me hear you talk about how hard life is."* and *"Don't gripe about what a mess things are in."* and *"Don't you dare whine about how ugly the city is now."*

Today, by corporate directive, Planet Fitness is a "no judgment zone." By God's command, Jerusalem was a "zero complaint zone."

And the reason God didn't allow the Jews to complain is that they were suffering due to God's discipline, which was due to their sin.

Had they not sinned so grievously over so many centuries, they wouldn't be in the mess they were in. God says, *"Don't complain. You did this to yourselves."*

There have been certainly times in my own life when I can look at a situation and honestly say, *"You know, if I hadn't done 'x' I wouldn't be in such a mess. This is my fault. Or at least partly my fault. I had a part to play here."*

You may be able to say the same thing about some of your own sufferings and messes.

In such cases, complaining is wholly inappropriate. The best course, when we have "done it to ourselves", is to accept the current difficulty as the discipline of God, submit to it, and learn from it.

But I would never suggest that all suffering is due to the discipline of God in our lives for misbehavior. That is simply not true.

Lots of times we suffer innocently and have done nothing to bring this or that suffering on ourselves. Some of those living in Jerusalem were caught up in a nightmare not of their own doing.

#### **When We are Innocent Bystanders**

##### *The innocent in Jeremiah's Jerusalem*

There were Jerusalem Jews in Jeremiah's day who loved the Lord. They hadn't rebelled against God. They were Mosaic-Law abiding people of God, innocent bystanders who got caught up in God's discipline that was due to the sin of others.

So, what are these people to say and to do when life turns bitter, and they had nothing to do with it? And what do we say to people who didn't have a hand in their sufferings and who are suffering as victims?

I would point to the stubborn fact of the world's brokenness.

And here, I'll go "off script" from Lamentations and turn to an incident involving the Jews that occurred centuries before Jeremiah.

*When the innocent suffer*

The scene is in the desert as they were being led by Moses on their way to the Promised Land.

Early in their time of wilderness wandering, after the miracle of the Red Sea crossing, something went wrong. There was trouble. We don't know what it was, so it could have been most anything.

Maybe there was a food or a water shortage or the days were too hot and the nights too cold, the kids were sick or the wheels kept falling off chariots. Whatever.

Some adversity struck the massive crowd of Jews as they were on the march through the desert. And they complained.

***[Numbers 11:1] Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD***

Woah! Can you imagine? Somebody complaining when they are facing adversity.

It actually seems reasonable to me. I mean, when else are we going to complain except when we are facing adversity?

But God wasn't pleased with their complaining. God reckoned His people guilty of sin for complaining of adversity. He said it was wrong for them to complain of adversity.

Regardless of what adversity they faced, they should not have complained. According to God, no adversity is sufficient to justify complaining.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Aside from Lamentations 3:39 ("**Why should any living man, or any mortal, offer complaint, in view of his sin?**"), this is the only time this particular word for "complaint" occurs in the Hebrew Old Testament.

***[Numbers 11:1] Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.***

If it seems to you or to me like an over-reaction from God to send fire from heaven for complaining, we simply don't understand complaining from God's point of view.

God takes responsibility for His people's welfare. So, when His people complain of their situation - even when times are very tough - they are casting aspersions on His goodness.

It is as if they are saying that God isn't much of a provider.

Our complaints and grumbles and gripes aren't just comments about our circumstances.

To God, they sound like snide remarks, as in, "*It sure would be nice if God would pay attention to our needs and take care of us every once in a while.*"

So, to give evidence of their faith in the goodness of God, the ancient Jews were to not complain, despite adversity.

And the same holds true for you and me, today.

We are to refrain from complaining. Not only when we are directly responsible for the adversity we are suffering, but even when we are not responsible.

To not complain is to say, "*God knows what He is doing in my life. He is good and I will trust Him.*"

God put up a sign in the days of Moses that was still up in the days of Jeremiah, "*No complaining allowed*". The sign is still up today.

There is a better way to live than to complain. And when we turn to just about the exact middle of the book, we find these words.

## The Way of Thanksgiving

### The Goodness and Grace of God

**[22] The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,  
For His compassions never fail.**

**[23] They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness.**

There's Jeremiah, sitting in the middle of Jerusalem's rubble. He looked to see if he could see more than he saw.

So, he looked. And sure enough, the more he looked, the more evidence he saw of God's goodness.

Over a long life, Jeremiah had nurtured the capacity to look for and find the goodness of God *despite* the ravages of war, disease, physical pain and loss, grief and poverty.

Jeremiah spent decades being rejected, long seasons in prison, even long days up to his neck in muck down in the bottom of a cistern. Despite all of that, He still saw God's goodness.

Now, in a devastated city, He looked again and, again, saw God's amazing grace.

He was living. Jerusalem still existed. Yes, thousands of Jews were in captivity - but they were alive.

All of that was all the evidence Jeremiah needed of God's love, compassion, and faithfulness.

Today, as Thanksgiving Day draws near, Lamentations calls you and me to join Jeremiah in looking for evidence of God's grace and goodness.

Maybe you're sitting on a pile of wreckage. Life is tough.

Looking honestly at that wreckage, maybe you can admit that some of it has something to do with you and your behavior.

No doubt, some of it has nothing to do with you and was completely out of your control.

Today, God is calling you to look up. Ask Him to let you see more than you have ever seen of how good He is.

Don't pretend things are better than they are. Don't deny reality. Do, though, nurture the capacity to see beyond the hard stuff to the good stuff. Ask God to open your eyes to see.

By any standard, Jeremiah had a really tough life AND he wrote the beautiful words we just read (vv. 22-23). He's got the credibility to say that if we will look for God's love, compassion, and faithfulness, we'll see it, too.

We won't see God's goodness, though, unless we are leaning into hope.

Hope that the bitter taste of today is not the last taste; hope that God is better than we ever dreamed He could be; hope that all the Bible holds out as true is true.

So, with courage, you cling to that hope. You put away complaint and embrace thanksgiving.

And as you learn to lead a life of gratitude to God, you latch on to another hope that the Apostle Paul mentions in a letter he wrote to some Christians in the ancient city of Philippi.

### **The Light of a Thankful Heart (Philippians 2:14-15)**

***[Philippians 2:14] Do all things without grumbling or disputing (= complaining!); [15] so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world...***

In the Old Testament, Jews were to lead a "no complaint" life. It's really not surprising that this is a mandate for Christians, too.

Paul says that if we, today, will adopt a no-complaint policy, we will shine like lights in a dark world. Who would have thought that one of the most winsome and effective means of shining for Jesus is simply choosing to not complain?

Imagine the impact it would make if you were known as the one person in your workplace who never complained, if you were the one member of your family who never griped about anything, if you were known here at church as the one who never grumbled.

Imagine, instead, that you were the one who could be counted on to always express gratitude to God, no matter what was going on around you.

I'm not saying that you don't address wrongs and I'm not saying that you don't look to improve circumstances. It's just that, because you trust that God knows what He is doing, and He loves you like crazy, you don't complain. You give thanks.

Over the last few minutes together, we've seen that throughout time, God wants complaining to play no part in the lives of His children.

Rather than complain, we are to engage in the ultimate act of hope. We give thanks for God's love, compassion and faithfulness.

### **Conclusion:**

*Thank God for His lovingkindness...*

Look to the cross of Christ where God's love was poured out for you. God loved you so much that He sent His only begotten Son so that if you simply believed in Him, you would have eternal life.

He didn't have to send Jesus. Nobody was twisting His arm. He did it because of His great love for you.

On your worst day, look to the cross and remember that there is a God in Heaven who loves you with an unfailing love.

*Thank God for His compassion*

Look to the Person of Jesus. The stories we read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John show that compassion oozes from His every pore.

Over and over we read that it was His compassion that moved Him to heal, to cast out demons, to raise the dead, to multiply fish and loaves?

He welcomes us to pray, changes our lives, and touches us - body, soul, and spirit as He breaks the power of sin.

*Thank God for His faithfulness*

And look at the God who is revealed in the Bible, beginning to end, and you will see His unfailing faithfulness. He always keeps His promises.

What He says He will do, He will do. Friends may fail you. Your closest friends may let you down. God will not fail to keep every promise He has ever made to you.